

First Avenue Public School 100th Anniversary

The 1940s Decade

May 10, 1999

**Gord Jenkins - former student -
early 40s- Kidergaten to Grade 6 -First Avenue Public School**

The students who attended during this period were affected by **World War Two**- plus the immediate post war effects. With so many fathers away at the war, single parents were common if not the norm. The students were sent out during school time on **paper drives** with a competition which class could gather the most.

Competitions were measured and won by inches. We were encouraged to buy War Saving Bond stamps – mostly at 25 cents a stamp! The teachers did not pressure us to buy, as they knew times were tough. Rationing was a fact during most of this decade – many a student, as a “reward” by a teacher was sent out during school time to cruise along Bank Street at the Two Sisters, Beamish, Dawson’s etc for stockings or meat. Lucky the child who could report that “store X” had three pair of silk stockings in!

Mr. Skipworth, the **school janitor**, would look the other way for students whose Dad was at war. One Saturday I put a baseball through Mr. Skipworths window (on Saturdays and Sundays the principals office became HIS office) I actually got my ball back and not a word was ever said. “Broken window – causes unknown” was the report submitted Monday by Mr. Skipworth. Boys always played on the field nearest the canal– girls on the O’Connor playing field. Cinders from the school coal fire were sprinkled on the boy’s side. A nice scrape when you fell wearing short pants! That is why we (boys) wore “brecks” which are jhodpurs- a form of riding pant - but they had LEATHER knees. Look - no more scrapes or ripped torn pants. Look at most pictures of boys in that era and you will probably see a scraped knee! The boys played soccer - well sort of. The supervising teacher dropped a soccer ball when recess began and all the boys started kicking.

After a while you waited the soccer ball to come your way and you and five other boys kicked the ball on its way. In the spring the boys played marbles on their playground and the girls on their side did hopscotch and skipping in their O’Connor Street playground. No mans land was between the girls playground and the boys playground behind the school in the area behind the school - side nearest Patersons Creek- no one played there!

I did not get my ball back immediately from Mr. Skipworth – I had to sit in the principals office and listen to a half hour of Mr. Skipworth stories of World War One and also about his time spent working on the Ottawa River timber rafts. He explained how they lived in shanties on the square log booms and how they put sand down to build their fires to heat their beans. To this day “sand baked beans” are advertised on the Quebec side. He was much better history teacher than a history book – although all I wanted to get was my ball back and get out of the principal’s office!

Why? Because the only time a student spent in the principal’s office was usually waiting for **the strap**. The strap was the “ultimate penalty “ by a teacher for a misbehaving student – “off to the principals office for you for the strap Jenkins” Gulp! The strap was a barbers strap of leather about a foot long and used – by barbers- to sharpen their razors. For students it was used on the hand – usually 2 to 3 waps – enough to redden a palm but not to draw blood. The only time I got more than 3 was the time I moved my hand and the principal administered himself a good slap on his shins. I still remember the pained look in his eye. I made the mistake of laughing – so my mirth did not last long! I think I had bragging rights for a couple of weeks for 10 waps (In fairness the principal gave it 5 on each hand) (The principal was actually an interesting person as he was a St Lawrence River pilot for Lake boats during the summer.)

In those days the strap was always given on your non-writing hand which was considerate. These were the days of inkwells; pens with temperamental nibs, black in bottles and nimble fingers were needed. One went through Grades One to Six with a permanent black ink stain between the index and middle finger from the ink. The stain has gone but I still have a permanent indentation from grasping the wooden pen.

Mr. Skipworth was in on Saturday and Sunday to look after the coal fire as he did the other five days of the week. The First Avenue "front classrooms" had in it a metal door that was opened to dump the paper down into the coal furnace from the first and second floors – something now that a parent today would have kittens about. We were issued regular chores of filling inkwells, cleaning the chalk brushes out the window or dumping the paper. Some of us were issued these chores more than others!! The bad boys!

Mr. Skipworth did not look after First Avenue **skating rink**? No, the City of Ottawa hired a retired gentleman - a different person every year for shack duties. It was the duty of this person to look after the skating shack- well at least the stove. Every year about the end of November the wooden boards would go up for the skating rink on the "boys school yard" side and the wooden shack would appear complete with round pot-bellied stove and retired gentleman.

It is my understanding from observation only that this person's one and only task was to keep the pot-bellied stove lit- but I could be wrong on this point. Anyway that is all I saw him do. The shack was to change our skates in and was a wonderful gathering place for the neighborhood. It was hot in the shack. And the smell was of wood and sweat! Mutchmore Public and Hopewell Public and all the local Public Schools had the same arrangement. The rinks (and shacks) are probably why so many of our generation are good skaters. Remember Barbara Ann Scott came from the Mutchmore/ Hopewell area and she used to practice there before going onto the Olympics.

Our generation are also good gardeners- at least the ones that went to First and the other Public Schools in the neighborhood. We had a **school garden** where we went to learn how to grow plants and flowers. I still have a vegetable garden and got my green thumb at the school gardens. The gardens took up about half a block on First Avenue opposite Glebe Collegiate- one block east on First from Bronson Avenue. If you look very carefully on First Avenue in this area you can tell where it was - the homes there are newer and still stand out. The gardens were staffed with retired teachers and their love of gardens really was evident to the students. We were taught the basics of how to plant seeds, weeding, looking after plants. On "graduation" we were presented with a flat of 6 tomatoes and 6 green beans.

We could have 6 snapdragon flowers also but the boys of course did not take the flowers. No way! That was not the end because during the summer the "School Garden Teacher" would take the time to visit your home for inspection of your plants. I lived in apartment at 156 First Avenue and the back yard was filled with cinders from the coal-fired furnace. Janitors would stuff and spread these cinders around everywhere! One of the tenants in our apartment felt sorry for my tired looking tomato plants so she tied on some small baby tomatoes. I thought the tomato stork had come overnight! The school garden was an excellent program run by a dedicated loving group of teachers. The "inspection" was on the retired teachers own time and trouble - imagine visiting each one of their graduates. Now that is dedication!

Teachers? How can I do justice to them all without remembering all? So I will tell about one teacher. I skipped Grade 3 - which means I was moved from Grade 2 directly to Grade 4 the infamous " Miss Kerr's "class (a pseudonym of course). I like to think I was moved from Grade 2 to 4 for intellectual merit - however the truth is probably more simple.

Miss Kerr's favorite punishment was making students sit on the floor as a form of punishment – at least that was her favorite until my mother came up to get me in class for a Dr. Dent dentist appointment. I have never seen my mother so mad or a teacher so defensive. May be it helped that I had a head cold at the time? – and with Mr. Skipworth's best efforts, the wood floors were cold.

Miss Kerr asked me one day to stay after school one day and I thought, "what have I done? " Turns out she wanted to trade me a brooch I had on my beanie for one she was wearing on her dress. A beanie was a mans hat with the rim cut off - with all sorts of badges, broaches and buttons of various groups on it- the more badges on it the better. Beanies were all the rage - a 1940s fad. Men – and women – had become sick of hats – and wearing them. This was probably a reaction to the war and the uniform hat. So men's hats were available for cutting off the rim and loading up with as much metal as hat could carry.

By the way the next day - sure enough - ferocious Miss Kerr was wearing my broach proudly on her dress! She wore my broach continually throughout the year.

We also walked to Mutchmore- or was it Hopewell? - for woodworking class in Grade 6 - in preparation for our next step -middle school - Glashan where they had an established an excellent woodwork, plastic and metal work program.

Matter of fact we did a lot of walking at First Avenue - to woodwork class, to school gardens, etc. We also were taken to the Victoria Museum, Parliament, and various local Ottawa companies - a surprising number of organized trips. At the E.B. Eddy tour one person was thrown a roll of toilet paper by one of the workers- that roll was the envy of everyone in the school for weeks. The Victoria Museum in those days had everything in art, artifacts, and archaeology (dinosaur bones to Tom Thompson artwork): items that are now in four museums distributed around both sides of the Ottawa River.

We walked with a pretty intricate system of school guards – mostly from Grade 6. One of the most responsible student positions was the be the school guard captain. This student would inspect the guards positioned around the key corners on the streets surrounding First Avenue. The furthest school crossing student guard was at 5th Avenue, which was my spot! School guard duties and ringing the bells for Grade sixers were about the only type of student responsibility involvement. There were of course the sports such as hockey and the use of **the Glebe Collegiate swimming pool**. A lot of us became a good swimmer because of the swimming program at Glebe that First Avenue Public School participated in.

We had assembly- not really regularly - in the small gym on the top floor. Sometimes there were skits and I remember enthusiastically participating in these presentations until one time I forgot my lines. I don't think I gave another speech for ten years! There was a mysterious school for "wayward girls " on the top floor for a number of years – the details of which I am unclear to this day.

The police came around and visited the school – as a matter of fact the Ottawa police sent over a sergeant who was mature and became a friend. To this day I look at the police as someone to help because of this relationship. The fire department also came over – we loved jumping into the net from the top window – something a parent would think twice about letting their child do nowadays. I can still remember that big black bulls eye and closing my eyes and jumping.

First Avenue will always be remembered by me for the "home like" excellence of the teachers- the right size for a school – the friends we met – and Mr. Skipworth.

Gordon Jenkins